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ABSTRACT

The theoretical language-skills model of James Britton can be used to explain the usefulness of reading instruction in developing competence in writing at the college level. Britton's model of writing, adjusted for mature writers, involves four stages: prewriting, writing, reconsidering, and editing. The first two stages, prewriting and writing, can be seen as the "writer's role"; reconsidering and editing can be seen as the "reader's role." Teachers can improve the students' reader role through guided experience with texts, which develops the sense of audience necessary for reconsidering and editing compositions. For example, teaching the technique of scanning for information when reading an article can impress on the students the necessity of highlighting the topic and signaling the subtopics with markers when writing an article, and teaching reading survey skills and the process of extracting information from a title will help writers create meaningful titles for their own work. (CC)

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Writer and Reader as Complementary Roles

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College-level teachers of basic language skills have become increasingly interested in the overlap between skills problems which have, traditionally, been categorized as either reading or writing problems. For example, at the word level, can we say whether a small vocabulary is a problem of reading or writing? Surely it is both: an underdeveloped vocabulary limits both reading comprehension and effective composition. Similarly, at the sentence level, syntactic immaturity handicaps both reading and writing. Francis Christensen (1967) has suggested that teaching students to manipulate more complex syntactic structures in their writing will also help those students comprehend complicated prose styles. And the growing literature on sentence-combining activities seems to show dramatic improvement in both writing and reading skills as a result of these exercises in syntactic fluency (Stotsky, 1975; Combs, 1977). Finally, at the level of total discourse, the paradigmatic structures that we teach as an aid to reading comprehension (e.g., cause-effect, thesis-proof, problem-solution) are the same structures we ask students to produce in basic composition classes (Sack & Yourman, 1965; D'Angelo, 1977). Such areas of overlap lead one to ponder the efficacy of uniting instruction in reading and writing skills. Moreover, it is possible to view current theories of composing as supporting a unified approach to basic-

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language pedagogy. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate how one specific theoretical model explains the usefulness of reading instruction for the development of competence in writing.

As background for the theory, it will be helpful to review some principles of the development of written language skills in children. The work of James Britton and his colleagues at the University of London has contributed significantly to our knowledge of this subject (Britton et al., 1975). The heart of Britton's research shows that development involves differentiation. As illustrated in Figure 1, the child begins writing in an expressive mode--writing primarily for himself about things in his immediate world, following the natural patterns of his expressive speech. With development, the child begins to "decontextualize" his experience, and his writing moves in two directions: toward poetic use of language, and toward transactional use of language. Expressive writing serves as a "matrix" from which the more differentiated forms develop.

-- insert Figure 1 about here --

Such a developmental scheme makes sense for young children, but how does it translate into an instructional program for the college student who is a poor writer? Moving to the adult model requires adjustment, but not abandonment of this scheme. The model for mature writing involves four activities, illustrated in Figure 2. The four boxes represent the four major stages of writing: an initial period of finding something to say (prewriting), followed by a formal writing-down of ideas in a draft (writing), then a reconsideration of the presentation

(reconsidering or revising), and finally the editing of the completed version to conform to appropriate conventions of

-- insert Figure 2 about here --

written language. Although this four-stage model is widely accepted, I want to emphasize a particular way of looking at the stages. The first two stages (prewriting and writing) can be grouped together, and I have labeled them the writer's role; the other two stages are also grouped, and I have labeled them the reader's role. The term "role" is useful because it denotes both point of view (as in "to assume a role") and activity (as in "to play a role in a drama").

The activities involved in playing the writer's role are quite similar to those of expressive writing: the emphasis is on the writer's engagement with ideas, and with his ability to express those ideas in written language. Just as children first learn to write for themselves, one aspect of adult composing also involves finding written language for the problems we are attempting to solve, or for the ideas we are trying to convey. Often, college students with weak educational backgrounds have a poor sense of how to play the writer's role. Such students have no facility with written expression; they seem unable to break through the barrier of written language--although their oral expression may be quite fluent. For such students, active practice in playing the writer's role is crucial for development, and excellent techniques have been suggested for loosening up these blocked writers (Elbow, 1973).

While there are a surprising number of college students who need help with the writer's role, such students are in the minority on most campuses. A much more pervasive problem is a failure to play the role of the reader. Most college students can manage the expressive task; they may even take it to an extreme, producing what Greenbaum and Schmerl (1970) satirically call "spill." With the writer's role as a base, it is important to move students toward assuming the reader's role: toward conceiving of their compositions as pieces intended for an audience, toward understanding their job as one of writing "reading."

In taking the reader's role, the student literally needs to view his composition from a new perspective, to step out of the writer's shoes and into the reader's shoes, so that he can understand his writing from the point of view of an audience. This is, unquestionably, one of the most difficult aspects of composing. Writers are often quite "egocentric," blinded to other points of view on their own writing (Moffett, 1968; Kroll, 1977). Moreover, reading one's own writing is difficult because it is at odds with the normal reading process (Lester, 1973).

The ability to see writing from the perspective of the reader is a late accomplishment for the child (hence the early emphasis on expressive writing) and it is a difficult achievement for the remedial college writer (hence an initial focus on the writer's role). Lack of this ability, often called lack of "audience awareness," may be responsible for a host of traditional writing problems. Trimble (1975) declares that many of the

college writer's problems stem from his self-centeredness: "his natural tendency as a writer is to think primarily of himself and thus to write primarily for himself. Here, in a nutshell, lies the ultimate reason for most bad writing" (p. 15). Mina Shaughnessy (1977) sees similar evidence of lack of audience awareness in basic college writing--the inexperienced writer assumes "that the reader understands what is going on in the writer's mind and needs therefore no introductions or transitions or explanations" (p. 240). James Moffett (1968) believes that the majority of communication problems arise from "the writer's assumption that the reader thinks and feels as he does, has had the same experience, and hears in his head, when he is reading, the same voice the writer does when he is writing" (p. 195).

What can be done about the student's failure to play the reader's role in composing? At least part of the solution involves giving the student experiences in which he can hear many others react to his writing (Elbow, 1973). By hearing how real readers respond, the writer can begin to internalize the voices of others, developing the ability to hear the "voice" of a hypothetical other when reconsidering his writing. Development of a student's sense of audience would seem to be a "basic" in the process of learning to write. Experiences which develop this "sense" should begin early in schooling, and should be a major part of composition curricula at all levels (Martin & Mulford, 1971).

Furthermore, I hypothesize that reading plays a major part

in developing the sense of audience necessary to reconsider and edit a text. It seems likely that it is the experience of reading that enables good writers to construct an internal model of what makes an adequate text. In some poorly understood way, our best students have made the connection between reading and writing--and they have done it without overt instruction. Weaker students, whose backgrounds have included minimal reading and writing, may never have intuited the simple truth that writers write reading. What such students need is not more advice about writing, not exhortations about considering their audience--they need guided experiences with texts to make this connection. Several exercises which reading teachers typically employ can, given a slightly different focus, also teach important principles of composing.

For example, the familiar technique of surveying or scanning for information can illustrate the necessity of highlighting information when writing. From the reader's point of view, a text is easy to survey when the topic is clearly stated near the beginning of an article, when the major subtopics are signaled by appropriate markers (e.g., first, second; moreover, nevertheless, hence; in conclusion, therefore, finally), and when key lexical items recur frequently enough to keep the reference clear. Students in a rapid reading course quickly learn to use such information. Thomas and Robinson (1972) remark that, "Alerting students to conspicuous signposts of the author can markedly increase their speed in scanning" (p. 149). If a writer sees his task as one of producing reading (not simply writing), then instruction which helps him understand how readers use signals

to comprehend efficiently is useful for structuring a paper: important information must be highlighted by stating the thesis clearly, by using special signal words, and by clarifying references to major concepts through repeating key terms. Such careful structuring of a text is not for the writer's own benefit--he already understands the meaning; structure is a concession to the reader.

As a second example, consider the case of a student who, in a paper explaining a quite specific aspect of college life, used the vague title "Colleges." This student clearly had no sense of the function of a title. I assume that this was because he viewed the task of producing a title from the writer's point of view: as a slightly bothersome task, required by his teacher. From the writer's view, a title is, perhaps, superfluous. From the reader's view, however, a title can be a quite useful aid in predicting the substance of an essay. When reading instructors teach survey skills they draw students' attention to the information that one can extract from a title. (For example, Sherbourne's [1977] first rule for skimming is to "Notice the title or chapter heading" p. 61.) Had this student been exposed to experiences in which a title was important for reading, and had the student been shown the implications of this experience for writing, I believe he would have made progress toward taking the <u>reader's role</u>.

In reality, the roles of <u>reader</u> and <u>writer</u>, neatly bifurcated in my model, may be simultaneous (or rapidly alternating) activities

for many fluent writers. However, separating the roles provides a pedagogy. Rather than abandoning the writer to sink-or-swim on his own, we can offer roles to play, models to follow. As a first priority, the novice writer needs to learn to express his ideas in written language. When he has gained some facility with written expression, we must help him improve the quality of of his composing by introducing him to the role of the reader. This involves activities designed to decenter his perspective, and it involves guided experience with texts. It is in this latter area--the reading of texts--that college-level reading instruction has much to offer the developing writer.

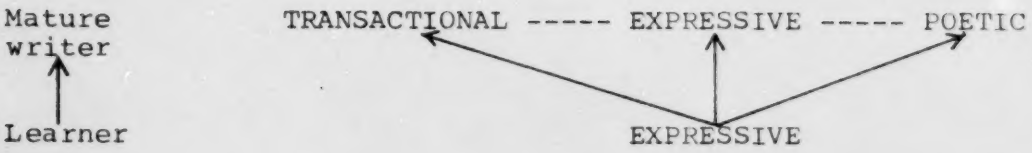

Figure 1. The development of writing ability (from Britton et. al., 1975).

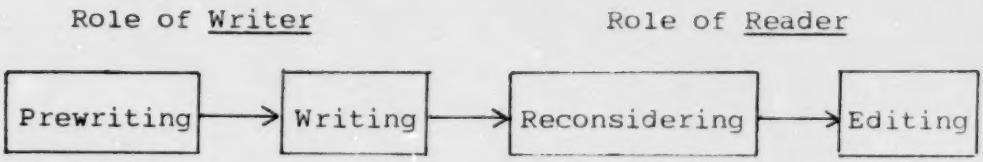

Figure 2. The composing process.

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